

**ELIZABETH
“BESSIE”
COLEMAN
1892-1926**



**BARNSTORMING
PILOT
INSPIRED
MILLIONS**

Bessie Coleman was the first African-American woman to earn a pilot's license, thrilled crowds by performing dangerous maneuvers and represented the heights that African-Americans could attain.

Elizabeth “Bessie” Coleman was born in Atlanta, Texas in January 1892 but raised in Waxahachie by her mother when her part Native-American father moved to Indian Territory. She walked four miles daily to her segregated, one-room school, where she loved reading and excelled at math. At eighteen, Bessie entered Oklahoma Colored Agricultural and Normal University at Langston but dropped out after only one semester when she ran out of money.

In 1915 she moved to Chicago to be near her brothers and work as a manicurist. She never publicly acknowledged a brief 1917 marriage to Claude Green, fourteen years her senior. When her brothers returned from France after the war, they told her that women there could fly planes. This made Coleman want to become a pilot. She was unsuccessful in getting lessons in America so black newspaper publisher Robert Abbott convinced her to go to France, where her race and gender wouldn't be obstacles.

To prepare, Coleman studied French, solicited financing and found a higher-paying job managing a chili restaurant. In November 1920, she was accepted at the flight school founded by aviation pioneers Gaston and René Caudron at Le Crotoy, near the English Channel, completing the course in seven months. On June 15, 1921, 29-year-old Coleman became the first black woman and Native American awarded an international pilot's license from the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale, granting her the right to fly anywhere in the world.

Coleman gave speeches to raise money for a proposed African-American flight school but refused to speak anywhere segregated. To become an aerial daredevil, Coleman returned to France in February 1922 to learn dangerous stunt maneuvers. She met with aircraft designer Anthony Fokker in Holland and trained with one of Fokker's chief pilots in Germany.

In her first American air show, Abbott billed Coleman as “the world's greatest woman flier”. She quickly gained a reputation as a daring pilot who stopped at nothing to complete a difficult stunt. Eventually, Coleman saved up enough to buy her own Curtiss JN-4 (Jenny) airplane. During a Los Angeles airshow, her new plane's motor stalled and she nose-dived from 300 feet, breaking a leg and fracturing her ribs. It took her months to recover, and two years to fly again.

By 1925, she purchased another Jenny. Her mechanic, 24-year-old William Willis, flew the plane from Dallas to Jacksonville for a May 1st air show. The plane's poor condition required three forced landings along the way. On April 30th, during a practice flight, Coleman was unharnessed in the second cockpit to peer over the side to identify a good parachute landing site during the show. About twelve minutes into the flight, the plane accelerated suddenly, nose-dived, went into a tailspin and flipped upside-down. The 34-year-old Coleman was killed when she fell from the plane. Willis was pinned under the plane when it crashed. As rescuers tried to move the plane, one lit a match for a cigarette, igniting gas fumes and burning the wreckage. Investigators determined that a loose wrench became jammed in the plane's control gears.

Her funerals in Jacksonville and Chicago each drew over 10,000 spectators. Coleman's sense of adventure, positive attitude and determination to succeed continues to inspire young people everywhere. African-American astronaut Mae Jemison carried her picture in space in 1992 after learning about the aviatrix. Coleman has been honored with a 1995 U. S. postal stamp and 2017 Google Doodle.